

Testimony of Stephen Kinzer to the Task Force on the
Declassification of Federal Secrets, House Committee on Oversight
and Government Reform

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Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to this task force for confronting the enormous issue of overclassification of government documents and the culture of secrecy that enables it. I am especially gratified by your interest in MK-ULTRA, the project the CIA carried out through the 1950s in an attempt to find the secret of mind control.

MK-ULTRA was one of the most secret government programs in American history. The chemist who directed it, Sidney Gottlieb, lived in total anonymity. Although my book “Poisoner in Chief” may be the most complete account of MK-ULTRA that exists, I am painfully aware that I have discovered only a small portion of what Gottlieb did and what MK-ULTRA was.

In 1951 the CIA hired Gottlieb and directed him to launch what became MK-ULTRA. Gottlieb believed that in order to find a way to implant a new mind into someone’s brain, it would first be necessary to destroy the mind that was there already. In its search for ways to destroy a human mind and body, MK-ULTRA conducted the most extreme experiments on human beings that have ever been carried out by a US government agency. By any standard they qualify as medical torture. These experiments took place in prisons, clinics, and safe houses in the United States, Europe, and Asia.

Officers of MK-ULTRA were authorized to travel to foreign countries, preferably those under formal or informal US occupation, and ask the local CIA station to provide them with “expendables”—human beings who would

not be missed if they disappeared. Gottlieb had what amounted to a license to kill issued by the US government. Neither the number of MK-ULTRA victims nor the number of those who were experimented to death is known.

Some information about MK-ULTRA spilled out during the 1970s. But senior CIA officers had intentionally let Gottlieb operate without supervision, so they were able to claim that they knew nothing about his excesses. This was a way for the CIA to deny its institutional role in MK-ULTRA, and to portray it misleadingly as the product of one man's sadism or excessive zeal.

Investigating MK-ULTRA is challenging because when Gottlieb and his mentor, Richard Helms, left the CIA in 1973, they illegally ordered that its records be destroyed. Soon afterward, under DCI Stansfield Turner, a CIA analyst discovered a cache of MK-ULTRA documents hidden among financial records. Turner credited the analyst with doing what he called "a very diligent job of Sherlock Holmesing." That same diligence could bring results today.

One obvious area for investigation would be the death in 1953 of an MK-ULTRA scientist, Frank Olson, who had announced his intention to quit the project. His plunge from a New York hotel window was reported as the suicide of an army scientist. He in fact worked for the CIA, and evidence suggests that his death may not have been a suicide. There could be long-hidden documents that would shed light on this case.

This task force could also consider trying to determine whether some new incarnation of MK-ULTRA exists today.

As the main phase of MK-ULTRA drew to a close in 1963, Sidney Gottlieb conceded that it had failed--that in fact there is no such thing as mind control. Even if he was right, however, he may have been right only at that time. In the six decades since then, there have been enormous advances in cyber technology, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence. Covert agencies may have access to tools for mind control that Sidney Gottlieb could not have imagined. It may well have been true in 1963 that mind control is a myth, but

is it still true? That question has presumably occurred to scientists working for secret services in various countries, including ours.

This task force has a chance to connect the past to the future. A renewed effort to find MK-ULTRA documents from the 1950s might shed new light on how the CIA operated during that period. It could also inform a new inquiry into whether any mind control projects are now underway inside the US security apparatus. That might help prevent the emergence of a 21st-century MK-ULTRA that could be even more destructive than the original.

Thank you.